

109TH CONGRESS
2D SESSION

S. 3808

To reduce the incidence of suicide among veterans.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

AUGUST 3, 2006

Mr. HARKIN (for himself, Mr. GRASSLEY, Mr. DEWINE, Mr. BROWNBACK, Mr. TALENT, Ms. SNOWE, and Mr. LAUTENBERG) introduced the following bill; which was read twice and referred to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs

A BILL

To reduce the incidence of suicide among veterans.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

3 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

4 This Act may be cited as the “Joshua Omvig Vet-
5 erans Suicide Prevention Act”.

6 **SEC. 2. COMPREHENSIVE PROGRAM FOR SUICIDE PREVEN-**
7 **TION AMONG VETERANS.**

8 (a) PROGRAM REQUIRED.—The Secretary of Vet-
9 erans Affairs shall develop and implement a comprehen-
10 sive program for reducing the incidence of suicide among
11 veterans.

1 (b) PROGRAM ELEMENTS.—

2 (1) DE-STIGMATIZING MENTAL HEALTH.—The
3 program required by subsection (a) shall include a
4 national mental health campaign to increase aware-
5 ness in the veteran community that mental health is
6 essential to overall health and that very effective
7 modern treatments can promote recovery from men-
8 tal illness. The campaign may include the following:

9 (A) Activities targeted at veterans of Oper-
10 ation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring
11 Freedom and the families of such veterans.

12 (B) Monthly messages on the Internet
13 website of the Department of Veterans Affairs
14 that express the theme that mental health is es-
15 sential to overall health.

16 (C) Inclusion of the theme described in
17 subparagraph (B) in public addresses, speeches,
18 and veterans service organization convention
19 addresses by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs
20 and other senior officials of the Department.

21 (2) TRAINING OF EMPLOYEES AND OTHER PER-
22 SONNEL.—The program shall provide for mandatory
23 training on suicide and suicide prevention for appro-
24 priate employees and contractor personnel (including
25 all medical personnel) of the Department of Vet-

1 erans Affairs who interact with veterans. Such train-
2 ing shall include information pertinent to the job of
3 such employees and personnel, including information
4 on the following:

5 (A) Recognition of risk factors for suicide.

6 (B) Protocols for responding to crisis situ-
7 ations involving veterans who may be at high
8 risk for suicide.

9 (C) Best practices for suicide prevention.

10 (3) FAMILY EDUCATION.—The program shall
11 include programs targeted at family members of vet-
12 erans to assist such family members—

13 (A) understanding issues that arise in the
14 readjustment of veterans to civilian life;

15 (B) identifying signs and symptoms of
16 mental health problems; and

17 (C) encouraging veterans to seek assist-
18 ance for such problems.

19 (4) PEER SUPPORT PROGRAM.—

20 (A) IN GENERAL.—The program shall pro-
21 vide support for the development of a program
22 to enable veterans to serve as peer counselors to
23 assist other veterans with mental health issues.

24 (B) PEER SUPPORT COUNSELING AS A
25 SUPPLEMENTAL SERVICE.—The program sup-

ported by subparagraph (A) shall be offered in addition to other mental health services already offered by the Department and services created pursuant to this Act.

(5) HEALTH ASSESSMENTS OF VETERANS.—

The program shall encourage all veterans, when they apply for benefits provided by the Department, to undergo a mental health assessment at a Department of Veterans Affairs medical facility (including a center established under section 1712A of title 38, United States Code).

(6) COUNSELING AND TREATMENT OF VET-

ERANS.—The program shall provide for referrals to appropriate counseling and treatment programs for veterans who show signs or symptoms of mental health problems.

(7) SUICIDE PREVENTION COUNSELORS.—The

program shall provide for the designation of a suicide prevention counselor at each Department of Veterans Affairs medical facility other than centers established under section 1712A of title 38, United States Code. Each counselor shall work with local emergency rooms, law enforcement agencies, local mental health organizations, and veterans service organizations to engage in outreach to veterans to in-

1 form them of mental health services that are avail-
2 able to them and to improve the coordination of
3 mental health care to veterans at the local level.

4 (8) ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES.—

5 The program shall include mechanisms to ensure
6 that veterans in rural and geographically remote
7 areas have access to quality mental health care. In
8 ensuring the delivery of quality mental health care
9 to such veterans, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs
10 shall collaborate with the following agencies:

11 (A) The Department of Health and
12 Human Services.

13 (B) The National Institute of Mental
14 Health.

15 (C) The Indian Health Service.

16 (D) The Health Resources and Services
17 Administration.

18 (E) The Substance Abuse and Mental
19 Health Services Administration.

20 (9) RESEARCH ON BEST PRACTICES.—

21 (A) IN GENERAL.—The program shall pro-
22 vide for research on best practices for suicide
23 prevention among veterans.

24 (B) STEERING COMMITTEE.—The Sec-
25 retary of Veterans Affairs shall develop a steer-

ing committee to advise the Secretary of Veterans Affairs on the research described in subparagraph (A). Such steering committee shall be comprised of representatives from the following:

(i) National Institute of Mental Health.

(ii) Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

(iii) Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

(10) RESEARCH ON SEXUAL TRAUMA.—The program shall provide for research on mental health care for veterans who experience sexual trauma while in service in the Armed Forces, including members who experience such trauma while serving in a reserve component of the Armed Forces.

(11) 24-HOUR MENTAL HEALTH CARE.—The program shall include mechanisms to ensure the availability of services for mental health care for veterans on a 24-hour basis.

(12) TELEPHONE HOTLINE.—The program may include a toll-free telephone number (commonly referred to as an “800 number”) through which veterans may obtain information on and referrals to ap-

1 appropriate mental health services. The telephone
2 number shall be serviced by personnel with appro-
3 priate mental health training, and shall be oper-
4 ational at all times.

5 (13) OTHER ELEMENTS.—The program may
6 provide for such other activities and programs to re-
7 duce the incidence of suicide among veterans as the
8 Secretary of Veterans Affairs considers appropriate.

9 **SEC. 3. REPORT TO CONGRESS ON SUICIDE PREVENTION**
10 **PROGRAMS AND ACTIVITIES.**

11 (a) REPORT REQUIRED.—Not later than 90 days
12 after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Secretary
13 of Veterans Affairs shall submit to Congress a report on
14 the programs and activities of the Department of Veterans
15 Affairs to reduce the incidence of suicide among veterans.

16 (b) ELEMENTS.—The report shall include the fol-
17 lowing:

18 (1) A description of the status of the implemen-
19 tation of the program required by section 2(a).

20 (2) A description of the scheduled implementa-
21 tion of the program during the two-year period be-
22 ginning on the date of the enactment of this Act, in-
23 cluding the costs of implementation of the program
24 over that period.

1 (3) A plan for additional programs and activi-
2 ties to reduce the incidence of suicide among vet-
3 erans.

4 (4) Such recommendations for additional legis-
5 lative or administrative action as the Secretary con-
6 siders appropriate to improve and enhance the sui-
7 cide prevention programs and activities of the De-
8 partment.

9 (c) CONSULTATION.—In developing the plan required
10 by subsection (b)(3), the Secretary shall consult with the
11 following:

12 (1) The National Institute of Mental Health.

13 (2) The Substance Abuse and Mental Health
14 Services Administration.

15 (3) Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

16 **SEC. 4. SENSE OF CONGRESS.**

17 It is the sense of Congress that—

18 (1) suicide among veterans suffering from post-
19 traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a serious prob-
20 lem; and

21 (2) the Secretary of Veterans Affairs should
22 take into consideration the special needs of veterans
23 suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder in de-

- 1 veloping and implementing the comprehensive pro-
- 2 gram required by section 2(a).

○